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Iraqis Stalled by a Tenacious Enemy

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BAGHDAD, Iraq, Feb. 27 — Despite overwhelming superiority in firepower and equipment and almost complete mastery of the air, the Iraqi Army is being ground down by Iran, its tenacious enemy, because it lacks motivation and the will to fight, Western military analysts and diplomats here say.

"They are nonachievers," a Western military attaché said of the Iraqi Army. "Although they've theoretically got the weapons, the equipment, the flag-waving and tub-thumping, they just don't produce results. The evidence is in."

The war began in September 1980. It entered a crucial new stage, many analysts here say, when on the night of Feb. 9 one of several Iranian probing attacks in the southern sector broke through long-entrenched Iraqi defenses near the city of Fao on the strategic peninsula near Kuwait on the Persian Gulf.

Moving swiftly, the Iranians poured thousands of soldiers, most of them fiercely religious Shiite Moslem volunteer irregulars, into the gap. Nearly three weeks later, after daily announcements of victories and after diverting huge amounts of artillery, tanks and troops, including the elite Republican Guard, in a counterattack, the Iraqis have not been able to oust them.

A Second Offensive

In the last few days Iran has also claimed success in a second offensive in the Kurdistan mountains of the northern sector — there were hundreds of Iraqi dead, the Teheran radio asserted today — that has not been mentioned in Iraqi military communiqués so far. In addition, Western military sources say, satellite photographs show a concentration of 10 to 15 regular Iranian Army divisions near Susangird, opposite the middle sector of Iraqi defenses.

Experts here contrasted what one described as "five and a half years of military incompetence" and a "ponderously inflexible" Iraqi command structure with the ferocious fighting spirit of the lightly armed Iranians, who rush into battle welcoming "martyrdom" at the behest of their leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Those who have seen the war from both fronts find the armies a study in contrasts.

The Iranian front lines tend to be scenes of chaos and dedication, with turbaned mullahs, rifles slung on their backs, rushing about on brightly colored motorcycles encouraging the troops. Religious slogans are posted everywhere, and sometimes reinforcements arrive cheerfully carrying their own coffins as a sign of their willingness to be "martyred." There is little sign of military activity behind the combat area itself.

Bunkers and Trenches

In Iraq, by contrast, the military zone extends for dozens of orderly miles of defenses behind the front with tanks and artillery dug into the dirt along the roadside, elaborate World War I-style bunkers and trenches, and dump trucks excavating grid-pattern defenses.

The Iraqis have the reputation of being the best trained force in the Middle East after the Israelis and the Jordanians. Military police man the intersections, uniforms and even footwear match, somewhat unusual among many Arab armies, and officers receive snappy salutes.

"They look sharp, well turned out and superficially disciplined," a Western career officer said. "But it's only superficial. When the chips are down, then the problem begins."

"The senior commanders here must realize by now that the people who have to do the dirty work — the grunts — are not steadfast in action," he went on. "The landings the Iranians just made demonstrate this: the lads manning the positions downed tools and ran away."

Fear of Fundamentalism

Iraq began the war motivated in part by a fear of the spread of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalist revolution, and expected to achieve victory in a few days. Baghdad made all its gains in the first weeks of the war and has since been pushed back to defenses on its own territory.

Calling the war a battle "between Islam and blasphemy," Ayatollah Khomeini has demanded the ouster of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and his Baathist Government, which holds a pan-Arab, secular ideology.

Typical Iranian tactics, military experts say, include waiting in a foxhole with an RPG-7 and blasting an oncoming tank at close range. The Iraqis, by contrast, rely on vast artillery fire from great distances and fortress-like defenses.

A military attaché recalled that in a major battle last year, the Iraqis used two full armored divisions, taking heavy losses of tanks, to crush an Iranian force that turned out to number only 1,500 men.

Superior Air Power

Western analysts here have also long been critical of what they consider the timid use of superior air power. Iraq has about 400 fighter bombers, while Iran is believed to have only about 60 or 70 serviceable planes left. Iraqi pilots do not come in low over their targets as standard tactics require, critics say, but drop their bombs ineffectively from great heights.

An ambassador who once wrote a report on Iraqi air strategy said: "It's like a chorus, the communiqués always say, 'All planes returned safely to base.' Well, you don't win a war that way."

Some military experts here traced the lack of enthusiasm among the soldiers to two major political factors: what they saw as a lack of a strong, clear sense of Iraqi national identity.

and ambivalent feelings about the Hussein Government and the Baath Party.

Like other Middle Eastern countries, with the exception of Egypt and Iran, Iraq is not a historic entity, but a set of lines drawn on a map by European powers, first as semicolonial mandates after the Ottoman Empire fell in World War I and then as independent countries after World War II. Iraq has had 22 "revolutions," most of them coups, since 1920. It is an ethnically and geographically diverse land.

'Veneer of Nationalism'

"They haven't had enough time for people at the extremes of the nation to believe in a unity for which to sacrifice themselves," a diplomat here said of the Iraqis. "I doubt whether the veneer of nationalism is very thick or very substantial."

Among the attempts to foster a sense of nationalism by Iraqi officials are constant programs on television of choruses singing patriotic songs, idealized military scenes, real battle footage of enemy corpses and festivals involving parades and dances.

The omnipresent portraits of Mr. Hussein in various guises are also an attempt to use the President as a unifying national symbol. A current joke holds that the population of Iraq is really 28 million: 14 million people and an equal number of portraits of Mr. Hussein.

Meanwhile, military analysts foresee a difficult time ahead for the Iraqi troops fighting in the Fao Peninsula, where hordes of tanks and trucks are gathered near the Umm Qasr naval base in anticipation of battle.

Shift for Key General

One sign of the seriousness with which the Iraqis view the situation is the appointment of one of their most flamboyant commanders, Maj. Gen. Abdel Maher al-Rashid, the head of the III Corps, out of the chain of command to head one of the three columns counterattacking in the VII Corps area.

"The generals have got to be presenting a daily bill to Saddam, if they dare to tell him the truth," a diplomat said. "I think the Iraqis will have a point where the casualties they take will become unacceptable, say if it was creeping up to 20,000. I would guess now it's maybe eight or nine thousand."

"These people are past masters at self-deception," he went on. "They could say, O.K., so there are some Iranians in Fao, they're humiliated by their defeat, we'll just seal them off. It doesn't matter and the wretched people here will accept it. They've already done this with North Majnoon Island, even though it's important, and they say they've taken the marshes back, but they haven't, the Iranians have been there for a year. They say these things so often, they believe it themselves, sometimes it's hard not to laugh when you're talking to them."

He added: "In my opinion, it's going to get harder in the meantime. Artillery alone will not do the job; neither will chemical weapons. At some point they will have to get on firm ground and fight hand to hand. And the martyrdom complex is not true here. They actually do mind dying."